I

YOUR OBITUARY, WELL WRITTEN

CONRAD AIKEN

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I

A couple of years ago I saw in the "agony column" of *The Times* a very curious advertisement. There are always curious things in that column—I have always been fascinated by that odd little company of forlorn people who so desperately and publicly wear their hearts on their sleeves for daws to peck at. Some of them appear there over and over again—the person who signs himself, or herself, "C.," for example: who regularly every three months or so inserts the message "*Tout passe, l'amitié reste.*" What singular and heartbreaking devotion does that brief legend convey? Does it ever reach the adored being for whom it is intended, I wonder? Does he ever see it, does he ever reply? Has he simply abandoned her? Were they sundered by some devastating tragedy which can never be healed? And will she go on till she dies, loosing these lovely flame-colored arrows into an utterly unresponsive void? . . .

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I never tire of reflecting on these things; but the advertisement of which I have just spoken was of a different sort altogether. This was signed "Journalist," and merely said: "Your obituary? Well written, reviewed by yourself, and satisfaction thus insured." My first response to this oddity was mere amusement. How extraordinarily ingenious of this journalist! It seemed to me that he had perhaps found a gold-mine—I could well imagine that he would be inundated with orders for glowing eulogies. And what an astonishing method of making a living—by arranging flowers, as it were, for the about-to-be-dead! That again was fascinating—for it made me wonder what sort of bird this journalist might be. Something wrong with him, no doubt—a kind of sadist, a gloomy creature who perhaps revelled rather unhealthily in the mortuary; even, perhaps, a necrophile. Or was he, on the other hand, perfectly indifferent and detached about it, a mere hack-writer who had, by elimination, arrived at a rather clever idea? . . . But from these speculations I went on to others, and among them the question—to me a highly interesting one—of what, exactly,

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one would want put into one's own obituary. What would this be? Would one want just the usual sort of thing—the "he was born," "he lived in Rome," "he was a well-known connoisseur of the arts, and a patron of painting," "conspicuous in the diplomatic society of three countries," "a brilliant amateur archæologist," "died intestate" sort of thing? . . . Or would one prefer to have one's personal qualities touched on—with perhaps a kindly reference to one's unfailing generosity, one's warmth of heart, and one's extraordinary equableness of disposition? . . .

By neither alternative did it seem to me that my "satisfaction could be insured." Neither for those who knew me, nor for those who did not, could any such perfunctory *eulogium* be in the least evocative. In what respect would these be any better than the barest of tombstone engravings, with its "born" and "died" and "he was a devoted father"? Mrs. X., or Mr. Z., reading of me that I was an amateur archæologist and a kind old fellow, a retired diplomatic secretary, would form no picture of me, receive from such bare bones of statement not the faint-

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est impression of what I might call the "essence" of my life: not the faintest. But if not these, what then? And it occurred to me suddenly that the best, and perhaps the only, way of leaving behind one a record of one's life which might be, for a world of strangers, revelatory, was that of relating some single episode of one's history: some single, and if possible central, episode in whose small prism all the colors and lights of one's soul might be seen. Seen just for a flash, and then gone. Apprehended, vividly, and then forgotten—if one ever *does* forget such things. And from this, I proceeded to a speculation as to just which one, of all the innumerable events of a well-filled life, I would choose as revelatory. My meeting with my wife at a ball in Calcutta, for example? Some incident of our unhappy life together—perhaps our quarrel in Venice, at the Lido? The effect of her suicide upon me, her drowning in the Mediterranean—the news of which came to me, while I was dining at the Reform Club, from the P. & O. Company? . . . I considered all of these, only to reject them. Possibly I rejected them—to some extent, anyway—simply

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because they were essentially painful. I don't know. Anyway, whatever the reasons, I did reject them, and at last found myself contemplating my odd little adventure with Reine Wilson, the novelist. Just why I fastened upon this, it would be hard to say. It was not an adventure at all: it was hardly even an episode. It was really nothing but the barest of encounters, as I see it now, or as any *third* person would see it. If I compare it with my protracted love-affair with Mrs. M., for example, or even with my very brief infatuation with Hilda K., it appears to be a mere nothing, a mere fragrance.

A mere fragrance! . . . Yes, it was that; and it is for that reason, I see now, that it is so precious to me. Volatile and swift as it was, it somehow caught into itself all the scanty poetry of my life. If I may be pardoned for appearing a little bit "romantic" about myself, I might say that it was as if I were a tree, and had, in this one instance, put forth a single blossom, a blossom of unique beauty, perhaps a sort of "sport," which, unlike my other blossoms, bore no fruit, but excelled all the others in beauty and sweetness. That sounds, in the prosaic statement,

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rather affected, I am afraid; but it is as nearly a literal statement of the truth as I can find.

It happened when I was a young man, about four years after I had married. I was already unhappy and restless. I wasn't wholly aware of this—I had, at all events, no conscious desire, as yet, to go in search of adventure. All the same, it is obvious to me now that I was, *unconsciously*, in search of some sort of escape or excitement. I went about a good deal—and I went about alone. My own tastes being mildly literary, and my wife's not, I made rather a specialty of literary teas and "squashes," and had soon made a considerable number of acquaintances among the younger writers who lived in London at that time. Among these was a group of young folk who ran a small monthly magazine called *The Banner*—a magazine which, like many other such things, ran a brilliant but sporadic course for a year or two and then went bankrupt. My friend Estlin first told me about this, and called my attention to the work of Reine Wilson, whose first novel was coming out serially in *The Banner*, and whose husband was assistant-editor of it. I read the

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first two chapters of "Scherzo," and I was simply transported by it. It seemed to me the most exquisite prose I had ever read—extraordinarily alive, extraordinarily poetic, and exquisitely feminine. It was the prose of a woman who was, as it were, all sensibility—of a soul that was all a tremulous awareness. Could one have —I asked Estlin—so ethereally delicate a consciousness, a consciousness so easily wounded, and *live?* And he horrified me by replying "No," and by telling me that Reine Wilson was —to all intents—dying. She had a bad heart, and had been definitely "given up." She might die at any minute. And she ought, by rights, to be dead already.

This shocked me, and also made me very curious; and when Estlin asked me, one day, to come to lunch with himself and the Wilsons, I needed no urging. We were to meet them at a little French place in Wardour Street—long since gone, I regret to say—and on our way thither we stopped at a pub for a glass of sherry. It was there that, by way of preface to the encounter, Estlin told me that there was something "queer" in the Wilson situation.

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"Queer?" I said.

"Yes, queer. Nobody can make it out. You see, they lived together before they married—when they were both writing for *The Times*. For about three years. But then, all of a sudden, they married: and the minute they were properly married — presto! — they separated. She took a flat in Hampstead—and he took one in Bloomsbury. Once a week, they held a reception together at her flat—and they still do. But so far as any one knows, they've never lived together from that day to this. He doesn't seem to be in love with any one else—and neither does she. They are perfectly friendly—even affectionate. But they live apart. And she always refers to him simply as 'Wilson.' She even *calls* him Wilson. Damned funny."

I agreed with him, and I pondered. Was it —I asked—because she had a bad heart? too much of a strain for her? . . . Estlin thought not; though he wasn't sure. He even thought that the bad heart had developed *after* the separation. He shook his head over it, and said "Rum!" and we went to meet them. He added, inconsequentially, that he thought she would like me.

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She did like me—and I liked her. At first sight. I find it difficult to describe the impression she made upon me—I think I was first struck by the astonishing frailty of her appearance, an other-world fragility, almost a *transparent* spiritual quality, as if she were already a disembodied soul. She was seated at a small table, behind a pot of ferns, which half concealed her face. Her brown eyes, under a straight bang of black hair, were round as a doll's, and as intense.

"Isn't it like meeting in a *jungle?*" she said. She made the tiniest of gestures toward the fern; and I was struck by the restraint with which she did this, and by the odd way in which her voice, though pitched very low, and very carefully controlled, nevertheless contrived to reveal a burning intensity of spirit such as I have never elsewhere encountered. There was something gingerly about her self-control: and also something profoundly terrifying. It seemed to me that I had never met any one whose hold on life was so terribly *conscious*. It was as if she held it—this small, burning jewel—quite literally in her hands; as if she felt that at any in-

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stant it might escape her; or as if she felt that, if it didn't escape, it might, if not firmly held, simply burn itself away in its own sheer aliveness. And to sit with her, to watch the intense restraint of all her gestures and expressions, and above all to listen to the feverish controlledness with which she spoke, was at once to share in this curious attitude toward life. Insensibly, one became an invalid. One felt that the flame of life was burning low—and burning low for *every one*—but burning with all the more beauty and pure excellence for that; and one entered into a strange and secret conspiracy to guard that precious flame with all one's power.

II

I had little opportunity, during that luncheon-party, for any "private" talk with Reine: the conversation was general. Not only that, but it was, as was to be expected, pretty literary, and I, perforce, took an inconspicuous part in it. Wilson struck me as a rather opinionated person, rather loud-voiced, rather sprawling, and I felt myself somewhat affronted by the exces-

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siveness of his "Oxford manner." In fact, I disliked him, and thought him rather a fool. How on earth—I wondered—had he managed to attract so exquisite a creature as his wife? What on earth had she seen in him? . . . For there was something coarse in him, and also, I felt sure, something dishonest. He seemed to me hypocritical. He seemed to me to be merely *posing* as a literary man. And I thought that his loud enthusiasms were the effort of the insincere to make an impression, to carry conviction. Was it possible that Reine didn't see through this? Or was it possible—and this idea really excited me—that she *did* see through him, and that it was for this reason that they had separated? . . .

I found myself setting myself in a kind of opposition to him: not by anything so obvious as contradiction, but, simply, by being very quiet. I quite definitely exaggerated my usual quietness and restraint of speech, endeavoring at the same time to make it very pungent and concise; simply because I felt that this was what she wanted and needed. And she rewarded me by being, in our few interchanges, extraordi-

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narily nice to me. I remember, when Wilson had been declaiming against the enormous emptiness of Henry James, and his total lack of human significance, that I waited for a pause and then said, very gently, that I could not agree: that James seemed to me the most consummate analyst of the influence of character upon character, particularly in situations of a profound moral obliquity, that there had ever been. Reine looked at me, on this, as if I had been a kind of revelation to her: her eyes positively brimmed with light and joy.

"*Isn't* he?" she whispered. She leaned forward, intently, with her small pointed chin resting upon her clasped hands; and then added: "No one else—*no* one—has made such beauty, and such *intricate* beauty, out of the iridescence of moral decay!" . . .

I don't remember what I said in reply to this —I am not sure that I said anything; but I do remember that I felt, at this moment, as if an accolade had been bestowed upon me. It was as if, abruptly, Reine and I were alone together—as if her husband, "Wilson," and my friend young Estlin, had somehow evaporated. I think I blushed; for I was conscious that suddenly she

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was looking at me in an extraordinarily penetrating way—appraisingly, but also with unmistakable delight. We had discovered a bond—or *she* had discovered one—and we were going to be friends. Obviously. A subtle something-or-other at once took place between us, and it was as much "settled" as if we had said it in so many words. And when we got up to separate, after the lunch, it was almost as a matter of course that she invited me to come to tea with her on the following Sunday. She was, in fact, deliciously firm about it—as if she were determined to stand no nonsense. It was to me she turned and not to Estlin (Estlin was much amused), and it was to me she first put out her hand.

"You *will* come to tea, won't you? Next Sunday? And bring Mr. Estlin with you? . . ."

I murmured that I would be delighted—we smiled—and then, taking Wilson's arm for support (my heart ached when I saw this) she turned and went slowly out through the glass doors to Wardour Street.

Estlin was smiling to himself, and shaking his head.

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"You're a terrible fellow," he said—"a terrible fellow!"

"Me?" I said. "Why?"

I knew perfectly well why, of course—but it pleased me to have Estlin say that I had made an unusual impression on Reine Wilson.

"And you may not know it," he added, "but she's damned hard to please. *Damned* hard to please. In fact, a good deal of an intellectual snob, and excessively cruel to those she dislikes. You just wait! . . . If she catches you admiring the wrong thing——!"

I laughed, a little discomfited—for I had already foreseen for myself that possibility. How could I, an amateur, keep it up? It was all very well to make one lucky shot about Henry James—but sooner or later I was bound to give myself away as, simply, not of her kin. . . . Or *was* I? . . . For I admit I was vain enough to hope that I might really be enough of a person, fine and rich and subtle enough, to attract her. How much was I presuming in hoping this? She had liked me—she had been excited by that remark—we had certainly *met* each other in a rather extraordinary way, of which

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she had shown herself to be thrillingly conscious. And I was myself, I must confess, very much excited by all this. She was, in every respect, the most remarkable woman I had ever met. I do not know how to explain this—for it was not that she had *said*, at lunch, anything especially remarkable: it was, rather, what she *was*, and *how* she said things. Her burning intensity of spirit, the sheer naked honesty with which she felt things, and the wonderful and terrible way in which she could appear so vividly and joyfully, and yet so precariously, alive—all this, together with her charming small oddity of appearance, the doll-like seriousness of face and doll-like eyes, combined to make a picture which was not merely enchanting. It was, for me, terribly disturbing. I was going to fall in love with her—and I was going to fall hard and deep.

Going to. I use the phrase advisedly. For there is always, in these affairs, a point at which one can say that one is *going* to fall in love, but has not yet done so: a point at which one feels the powerful and seductive fascination of this other personality, feels drawn to it almost irre-

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sistibly, and knows that *unless* one resists one is going to be enslaved. Nevertheless, it *is*, at this point, still possible to resist. One can turn one's back on the Siren, turn one's ship away from Circe's Isle, sail away—if one only has a little courage and good sense. Good sense? No. *That* phrase, I am afraid, has crept down to me from the Victorians. What I would prefer to call it now, in my own case, is cowardice. Or, if you like, caution. Or again, respect for the conventions. For I am sure that is what it was. . . . During the five days which intervened between the luncheon-party and my engagement for tea, I did a lot of thinking about this. I knew perfectly well that if I were to let myself go, I could fall in love. But did I want to fall in love? And suppose I did. Quite apart from my own domestic complications—and the situation with my wife was already quite sufficiently unpleasant—what good would it do me? For I was desperately, horribly, miserably sure of one thing and one thing only: that Reine Wilson would not fall in love with me. Or if she did, that she would fall out again in double-quick time. And there, hung up for the crows to peck at, I would be. . . .

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I thought about this—and thought and thought. But I didn't—as the hours crept toward Sunday—find any solution. Of course, I would go to tea—there was no question about that. So much rope I would grant myself, and no more. No harm could come of that—or at any rate, no greater harm than was done already. One is ingenious, when one is falling in love, at finding good excuses for meetings with one's beloved. Yes, I would go to tea—and *then* I would make up my mind as to the future. A good deal would depend on what happened at tea. If I should disgrace myself—if she were to find me out—or, as was only too likely, if she simply found me uninteresting, a nice young fellow, no doubt, with an idea or two, but not at all on *The Banner* level—well, that would be the end of it. But if, on the other hand, our mutual attraction should deepen—if, somehow, by hook or by crook, I should manage to keep up the deception—or even, actually, to prove a sufficient match for her—what then? . . . What would happen to us? . . . What about my wife? . . . What about that detestable "Wilson"? . . . And, above all, what about her bad heart? . . .

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III

The new number of *The Banner* came out on Saturday, and it contained of course another instalment of "Scherzo." I read this—and it seemed to me even more delightful and more obviously a work of first-rate genius, than the chapters which had gone before. It was in this instalment that the description of the picnic occurred. This entranced me. Never, it seemed to me, had an *al fresco* party been so beautifully done in prose. The gaiety, the coltish rompings of the young girls, that marvellously described wood, and the cries of the children in it, playing hide-and-seek—the solemn conversation of the two little boys who had discovered a dead vole, and were wondering how most magnificently to dispose of it—the arrival of Grandma Celia with the basket—and above all, Underhill's dream. It seemed to me a stroke of the finest genius to have poor Underhill, at that crisis of his life, dragged into such a party—frisked about, romped over, made to tell stories and to light fires; and then, when he sneaked away and found a clearing in the gorse and

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slept, having that marvellous dream—! The dream was so vivid and so terrifying that I felt as if I had dreamt it myself. It was I who had been in that cottage during the thunderstorm—it was I who tried vainly to shut the rattling windows and doors against the torrents of rain and hail, hoping to protect those mysterious "other people"—and it was I who finally, disheartened, despairing, had set out to climb the black mountain valley toward the storm. And the description of that Alpine valley, with its swishing pines and firs, and the terrible white cloud which hung at the upper end of it! My blood froze as I moved toward that cloud and saw the death-lightning which shot from it unceasingly. It hung there portentously: like death itself. And I, who had at first moved toward it as if voluntarily, now felt myself being drawn off the ground and into the air—I floated at first a foot or two off the path and then a little higher—I was on a level with the tops of the trees, and every second drawing nearer to the dense white cloud—I could see, at last, that it was a magnificent cold arch of greenish ice, impenetrable and hostile—its cold vapor blew

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upon me—and then came a final flash and I knew that I was already dead. . . . It was superb, it was annihilating. And only the most daring of genius would have presumed to expand a mere dream, in the midst of a realistic narrative, to such proportions, and to concentrate in it all the agony and tragedy of a torn soul.

I was still in a fever of excitement about this when I was shown into Reine Wilson's sitting-room by a young woman who seemed to combine the functions of housekeeper and trained-nurse. Reine rose to greet me, rose slowly and weakly and with conscious effort, and then, having given me her hand, was assisted by the young woman to her chair by the tea-table. The young woman brought in the teapot and the hot scones, and then withdrew. I had seated myself on a couch by the open window. A double-red thorn-tree was in blossom in the small garden, and its fragrance filled the room.

"I've just been reading—" I said—in a voice that I am afraid shook a little—"your new instalment of 'Scherzo.' I think it's perfectly entrancing."

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Reine looked at me, I thought, with a trace of hostility—I was certain that my approach had been too blunt.

"Oh, *do* you?" she said. And then immediately added, with a kind of careful lightness: "One lump or two, Mr. Grant? . . . Is this too weak for you?"

I stood up and moved to the tea-table for my cup of tea, and for the hot scone which she offered me; and suddenly I felt horribly shy. I had ruined myself at the outset—I had rushed in too fast and too far. I ought to have known better. I ought to have known that I must leave the lead to her, and follow up the controlled reticence of manner with which I had made such a success at the luncheon-party. A violent outbreak like that—! With a creature so exquisitely sensitive!—I felt clumsy and coarse and miserably ashamed. And I sank on to the couch again very much humiliated and very conscious of my hands and feet.

But Reine to my astonishment had mercy on me.

"I'm *so* glad you liked it!" she said. And she said it with such an air of relief, and with a

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voice so rich in delight, that I felt a shock of returning confidence as vivid and intense as, a moment since, its departure had been. And I had an instant and heavenly conviction that I could now throw all caution to the winds. She looked at me with wide-open eyes—it was almost as if she looked at me with wide-open soul. We had, abruptly, "met" again: and we had met more intimately than before. It was strange, at that moment, how everything seemed to be conspiring to make this mutual recognition complete: the long room lined with bookcases; the high mantel of cream-colored wood and the pale Dutch tiles which surrounded the fireplace; the worn Khelim rug which stretched between us, and the open window, which it seemed not improbable that the thorn-tree itself had opened, in order that its fragrance and the London spring might come in to us—all these details were vividly and conspiratorially present to me, as if they were indeed a part of the exquisite mingling of our personalities at that poised instant of time. Was not I myself this room, this rug, that mantel, the tea-table spread with tea-things, and the inquisitive thorn-tree?

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Was not I myself Reine Wilson, entertaining a strange young man in whom I felt a subtle and bewildering and intoxicating attraction? Destiny was in this—æons of patient evolution and change, wars and disasters and ages of darkness, the sandlike siftings of laws and stars, had all worked for the fulfilment of this ultimate minute, this perfect flowering of two meeting minds. I could not be mistaken in my belief that it was the same for her as for me. With the deep tremor in my own soul, I could feel the tremor in hers. If it were not true, she could not possibly be holding her teacup as she did, or frowning slightly as she did, or withholding, as she deliciously did, the smile of delighted confession which I knew she was near to giving me.

"You know—" I then added—"I think that dream is marvellous—simply marvellous."

"*Do* you!" she cried. "But how lovely! You *really* liked it? You didn't think there was too much of it? . . ."

She leaned toward me with the eagerness of a schoolgirl, her eyes wide with intensity.

"Too much of it! Heavens, no. I was never so enthralled by anything in my life."

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"But do you *mean* it? . . . Why, you know, Wilson wanted me to 'cut' it. He said it was far, far too long. And everybody on *The Banner* has said so. . . . But *you* think it's all right? . . ."

"It's much more than all right. It couldn't possibly be anything but what it is. It seems to me to be the very *soul* of the thing—the centre and source of light. It had to be that, hadn't it? . . . I mean, a glowing symbol for the whole thing. For Underhill's Gethsemane. . . ."

She looked at me, after this, for a long moment, and then she drew in her breath very slowly and deeply, subtly relaxing.

"Heavens!" she said—"you *are* a miracle."

"Am I?"

"You know you are. I hadn't *dared* to suppose that any one would see what I intended by that. Or would like it, even if they did. . . . Isn't it extraordinary!"

She gave an odd light little laugh, not without a trace of bitterness, and then, with a smile still charmingly lighting her small face, gazed downward abstractedly at the Khelim rug. I knew what she meant by "extraordinary"—she

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meant that it was extraordinary that two minds should find each other as swiftly and easily as ours did. I knew also that she would not want the strangeness of this, and its beauty, too explicitly noted. For that would be to spoil it.

"Yes," I sighed, "it is. . . . Can I steal another scone?"

"Do! . . . Have one of the underneath ones —they're hotter!"

I took one, and returned to the couch. The room had suddenly darkened—it had clouded up—and a momentary patter of drops on the leaves of the thorn-tree sounded in the silence, as if it were inside the room.

"Rain!" I said. . . . "I love it! Don't you?"

"You mean the sound of it? . . ."

"No—everything. The sound, yes, but also the light—rain has always had for me, ever since I can remember, a special sort of *magic*. On rainy days I experience a special kind of delicious melancholy—a melancholy that is happy, if that means anything to you. I brood, my imagination is set free, I am restless and depressed, and yet at the same time it is as if something inside me wanted to sing. . . . Don't I sound like a sentimental idiot?"

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"Oh!" she said, "how *nice* of you!"

She rose, very gingerly, and coming to the end of the couch rested her two hands on the blue-canvas arm, one hand on top of the other. As she looked out through the window at the thorn-tree, watching the small leaves courtsey and genuflect to the raindrops, and then spring up again released, I felt as if I were going to tremble. I found myself thinking about her heart again—she looked so astonishingly frail. How could so frail a body, a body so ethereally and transparently slight, contain a spirit so vivid? One felt that with the slightest flutter the bright bird might escape and be gone.

"Yes," she said, in almost a whisper, as if to herself, "it is beautiful . . . beautiful. It does make one want to sing. And how the thrushes adore it!"

"I remember—" I said—"how once, when I was a small boy, I went bathing in the sea on a darkish day. While I was swimming, it began to rain. I was at first astonished—almost frightened. The water was smooth—there was no sound of waves—and all about me arose a delicate and delicious *seething*, the low sound of

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raindrops on the sea. It was a ghostly and whispering sound—there was something sinister in it, and also something divinely soothing. I lay on my back and floated, letting the drops fall on my face while I looked up at the clouds—and then I swam very softly, so as to be able to listen. I don't believe I was ever happier in my life. It was as if I had gone into another world. . . . And then, when I went ashore, I remember how I *ran* to the bathing-hut, for fear of getting wet! . . ."

"Of course!" she cried. "Of course you would! . . ."

She sank down on the couch, facing me. And then she went on:

"You've given me back something I had forgotten. . . . It must have been when I was eleven or twelve. It was raining very hard—it was pouring—and when I went down to the library to practise at the piano the room was dark, with that kind of morning darkness that engulfs one. The French windows were open on to the garden, but the curtains hung perfectly still, for there was no wind, no current of air. One of those heavy, straight rains, on a quiet day—a rain as solid and serried as rain in a

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Japanese print. . . . I went into the room and closed the door behind me—and it seemed to me, so massive and insistent was the sound of the rain from the garden, with all its multitudinous patter and spatter, that the room itself was full of rain. The sounds were the sound of water, the light was the light of water—it was as if I were a fish in a darkened aquarium. I stood still for a long while, just drinking it in and staring out at the drenched garden, where all the trees and shrubs were bowed down under the unrelenting downpour. Not long before, I had seen somewhere some photographs greatly enlarged, of raindrops falling into water: and now, as I went to the open French windows, I watched the large bright eave-drops splashing into the puddles on the brick terrace, and I was enchanted to see that *my* drops were exactly like those. They made the most exquisite little silvery water-spouts and umbrellas and toadstools, and all with such a heavenly clucking and chuckling and chirruping. The bubbles winked and were gone—is there anything so evanescent as a rain-bubble?—and other bubbles came, sliding a fraction of an inch to right or left be-

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fore they burst. . . . I had a strange feeling, then, as I turned to go to the piano—I felt as if I belonged to the rain, or as if I were the rain itself. I had a sensation in my throat that was like sadness, but was also ecstatic—something like your desire to sing. I looked at the glossy black grand piano—and that too had a watery look, like a dark pool gleaming under a heavy overhang of foliage. And when I sat down on the cool piano-stool, and touched timidly my fingers to the keys, the keys too were cold, and it was as if I were dipping my hands into the clearest of rain-water. . . . Is it any wonder that the music sounded to me like the drops pattering and spattering in the garden? I was delighted to the point of obsession with this idea. I played a little sonata through three times, luxuriating in its arpeggios and runs, which I took pianissimo, and feeling as if I were helping the rain to rain. . . . Good heavens! If I had only known the Handel Water-Music Suite! The illusion would have been perfect. . . ."

"It's so perfect for me," I said, "that I am tempted to look at your hands to see if they are still wet."

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We smiled at each other, then, our eyes meeting with a shyness that was not altogether a shyness; and after a moment, by a common impulse, turned to look out at the red-blossomed tree, from which arose a soft irregular patter. We were silent for a long while. In fact, I think we sat there in complete silence till the nurse-companion came back again for the tea-things; and I remember noticing everything, every minutest detail, in the small brick-walled garden. A laburnum-tree at the farther end with long pendulous blossoms, of so bright a yellow that it gave one the illusion of sunlight against the dark wall. And a row of lupins along a flagged path, with a bright eye of water in every one of the dark hand-shaped leaves. . . . These things are still vivid in my memory. But what we said to each other after that I cannot recall. I don't think we said very much. We felt, I think, that we had already said all that was essential. I do remember Reine's saying that "Wilson" had gone off somewhere to play cricket: and also she said something about a dismal female tea-party to which she had gone in Earl's Court the day before. But that, I think,

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was all; and not long afterward I rose and came away.

IV

I never saw her again. In the first place, I funked it—I was afraid that I couldn't keep it up. The thing was so exquisite as it stood, so perfect—and besides, what could I do? It seemed to me that almost anything, after that, would be an anti-climax. If I were to go again, there might be some one else there—we should have to be stiff and distant with each other—or we wouldn't be able to talk to each other at all. Wilson might be there, with his loud fake enthusiasms and his horrible Oxford manner and his sprawling tweed legs. . . .

At bottom, however, it was a kind of terror that kept me away. I was in love with her, and I had more than a hope that she was very nearly in love with me. But hadn't we already had the finest of it? The thing, as it stood, was all bloom and fragrance; and mightn't it be only too appallingly easy, by some unguarded shaking of the tree, to destroy the whole rare miracle? . . . Wouldn't I—to use a less poetic image—

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let the cat out of the bag, if I were to go again? And then there was her bad heart, and the fact that we were both, alas, married. The complications and miseries, if we *did* allow the meeting to go further, might well be fatal to both of us.

Even so, I am not sure that I wouldn't have gone, had not fate in the guise of the Foreign Office intervened. I was sent, only a few weeks later, to Rome, where my duties kept me for a year and a half. It was while I was there that "Scherzo" came out in book-form. Estlin sent me a copy—and I at once sat down and wrote a letter to Reine, a brief one, telling her again of the incomparable delight it gave me. It was a month or more before I heard from her—and then came a short note from Seville. It was rather cool, cryptic, distinctly guarded. She thanked me formally, she was glad I liked the dream so much, she felt, as I did, that the ending was perhaps a shade "tricky," of a "surprise" sort which didn't quite "go" with the tone of the rest. That was all. But there was also a postscript at the bottom of the page which seemed to me to be in a handwriting a little less

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controlled—as if she had hesitated about adding it, and had then, impulsively, dashed it in at the last minute. This was simply: "I always think of you as the man who loves rain." . . . That was all.

It was only a few weeks after this when opening *The Times* in a small café in the Via Tritoni, I was shocked to see her name in the column of death announcements. "Suddenly, at Paris, on the 18th of March." . . . Suddenly, at Paris, on the 18th of March! . . . I sat and stared stupidly at the announcement, leaving untouched on the little table before me my *granita di cafe con pane*. . . . Reine Wilson was dead—Reine was dead. That little girl who had stood in the dark room by the French windows, her sleeve brushing the stirless curtains, watching the rain—who had dipped her hands through the clearest rain-water to the white piano keys—and seen the little umbrellas of silver—was dead. I got up and walked out blindly into the bright street. Without knowing how I got there, I found myself presently in the Borghese Gardens. There was a little pond, in which a great number of ducks were sailing

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to and fro, gabbing and quacking, and children were throwing bread into the water. I sat down on a bench under a Judas-tree—it was in blossom, and the path under it was littered with purple. An Italian mother slapped the hand of her small boy who was crying, and said harshly "*Piangi!* . . . *Piangi!* . . ." Cry! Cry! . . . And I too felt like weeping, but I shed no tears. Reine Wilson the novelist was still alive; but Reine Wilson the dark-haired little girl with whom I had fallen in love was dead, and it seemed to me that I too was dead.

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